

Assessing Undergraduate Fashion History Research via Content Analysis

Method: Content Analysis

Author: Justine De Young, *Fashion Institute of Technology*

Mentor: Kelly Donahue-Wallace, *University of North Texas*

SoTL Introduction

Justine De Young's research project began with two questions: do the essays written for the *Fashion History Timeline* constitute the good art historical research that she sought and if so, how, specifically, do they do so? To answer these questions, Dr. De Young first sought a standard definition of good art historical research, which she found in the College Board's rubric for the Advanced Placement Art History Examination essay. This resource identified the use of visual and contextual evidence as two markers of quality in the discipline's writing. Next, she tailored this standard for the idiosyncrasies of fashion history relevant to the project she assigned her students. To complement the analysis of what the students wrote, she developed a list of standard technical writing characteristics found in art history papers based on widely-accepted disciplinary practices and her years of experience as instructor. Her purpose in this was to examine *how* the students presented the information.

Since writings were the subject of the research investigation, De Young first employed a qualitative research method called content analysis to a sample of student essays. This method looks for words, phrases, or sentences—known as the coding scheme—that the researcher will accept as evidence demonstrating a particular characteristic during the analysis. In this case, the characteristic was the articulation of types of visual and contextual evidence. Having developed her coding scheme, De Young analyzed the student essays, producing quantitative data. That is, she counted how many times individual essays exhibited the characteristics of good art historical writing. Based on this evidence, she classified each essay as publishable with little additional editing needed (meaning of very good quality), publishable after more substantial editing (meaning of moderate quality), and not publishable in its current form. She additionally tallied the objective characteristics of technical writing to triangulate with the results of the content analysis.

The great significance of Dr. De Young's article to art history instructors consists in developing a systematic way to assess the quality of student writing. From our teaching experience, we know what constitutes a good art history student essay. Dr. De Young's method gives instructors a way to prove it more objectively.

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Justine De Young
Fashion Institute of Technology

Introduction

In a 2018 essay, I discussed the [Fashion History Timeline](#), an open-access source for quality fashion history knowledge. Much of the site's core content has its roots in the course, HA 344: The History of Western Costume, a survey of fashion history from prehistory to 1914 at the Fashion Institute of Technology. The final assignment for this course is an essay researching and analyzing the dress depicted in an artwork. Since 2015, I have worked with these student essays in a rigorous review and revision process, with a selection being chosen for publication on the *Fashion History Timeline*. My goal in doing so is to provide the site's global audience with well-researched, accessibly written essays on specific [artworks](#) to accompany the site's other entries dedicated to [garments](#), [films](#), [term definitions](#), exhibition reviews, decade overviews, year overviews, and more.¹

Between 2015 and 2018, I taught the course eight times, receiving and grading 175 artwork analysis essays. Of these, all went through the revision process and 35 have been published to date on our new website (launched February 2018); 41 are in various stages of the editing process and 40 await migration from the old site. At the same time, I gained a general sense of what made the essays successful or not and adjusted the assignment instructions every time I taught the class in order to elicit stronger, publishable work.

Yet, I was curious to know more concretely what was working and what was not in the hopes of improving student outcomes and of helping students create more fashion history research that could be considered a contribution to the field. In what way did these student essays meet disciplinary quality standards following my interventions as instructor and editor? Performing a content analysis of a sample of the submitted essays offered a means of quantifying whether or not the assignment resulted in quality fashion history research and of identifying which sorts of visual and contextual evidence students were best at using and at which they were weaker. The following paragraphs present this analysis and its results for art historians who may undertake similar projects.

Background

¹ For more on the *Timeline*, see Justine De Young, "The *Fashion History Timeline*: Rethinking Student Research as Public Scholarship," *Art History Teaching Resources*, September 7, 2018, <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/2018/09/the-fashion-history-timeline-rethinking-student-research-as-public-scholarship/>.

In his 2016 dissertation, Joshua Yavelberg demonstrated that art history instructors consider communication (including writing) and research as core skills for art history students along with visual analysis and critical thinking.² Julia Sienkowicz, in fact, argued in the inaugural issue of this journal for abandoning content-based learning outcomes in favor of developing skills, specifically “the understanding and application of ideas,” that transfer to the appreciation and study of art outside the classroom and the “writing and research necessary for greater command” of art history.³ In light of this widespread assumption that research and written communication are essential to our discipline, it comes as little surprise that Sylvan Barnet’s classic text, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, now in its eleventh edition, is a standard assigned text to new art history students.

HA 344: The History of Western Costume shares many of the standard art historical learning outcomes albeit from a fashion perspective to support FIT’s curriculum. For example, students are expected to learn to “identify, describe, interpret and date fashionable dress...as represented in works of art and exemplified by surviving garments and accessories, using the appropriate historical vocabulary.” They are also taught to “discuss Western costume and fashion in relation to major movements and styles in the history of art,” “recognize scholarly and reliable sources of information about the history of costume,” and “employ effective written- and oral-communication and research skills that demonstrate critical thinking.” The writing pedagogy I employ in the class is informed by the 5.5 years I spent teaching writing in art history as part of the faculty of the Harvard College Writing Program and also by research in the field.⁴ Like David Smit, I question the perceived “crisis” in student writing and believe that if we wish to see improved student writing we must teach students how to write and provide multiple opportunities to practice that skill.⁵ I most certainly want to improve student research and writing skills to better equip these young scholars, but also I am trying to improve awareness and knowledge of fashion history as a part of art history. To that end, from the very beginning of my time at FIT, we have been publishing the best student essays online on the *Fashion History Timeline* website (<https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu>).

The published artwork analysis essays on the *Timeline* come from the course’s final assignment, which asks students to place the dress seen in their artwork in its social and fashion history context. All students organize their essays in pre-established sections. An “About the Artwork” section at the start of the essay contextualizes the artwork within the artist’s career and the time period, and “About the Fashion” looks at the dress depicted in the artwork. Some essays also

² Joshua Yavelberg, “Discovering the Pedagogical Paradigm Inherent in Introductory Art History Survey Courses. A Delphi Study,” (Ph.D. dissertation, George Mason University, 2016), 88-98.

³ Julia Sienkowicz, “Against the “Coverage” Mentality: Rethinking Learning Outcomes and the Core Curriculum,” *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 1, (1): 3. Available at <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol1/iss1/5/>, accessed 7/4/2019.

⁴ See especially Susan A. Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010) and Katherine K. Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj, *Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004).

⁵ David W. Smit, “Improving Student Writing. Idea Paper No. 25,” September 1991, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED339037>.

include an “Afterlife” section, where students consider the legacy of the styles seen on contemporary designers. Students are required to use at least three book sources, to find and discuss at least five comparison images with complete caption information, to use parenthetical citations, and to create a Chicago-style bibliography using Zotero, which they learn for a previous assignment. I stress to them that the focus of their artwork analysis should be on the fashion—was the look fashionable or not for its time?—as that is the focus of our course. Model essays are available to students on the *Timeline* and an example is discussed thoroughly in class.

Students submit annotated bibliographies, scans of their sources, and five comparison images in Google Docs two weeks before their essay drafts are due. I comment on these bibliographies and images, affirming some choices, rejecting others, and suggesting additional sources and images they have not yet considered, when appropriate. Their essay drafts are submitted on the *Timeline*’s WordPress platform, which students become familiar with during an earlier project. Students are then required to revise those drafts based on my feedback before the end of the course. My typically half-page, bullet-point list of feedback flags common errors, but also comments specifically on what is missing or could be improved in their essay. Comments are transmitted instantly to students via the online platform and so they have between one and two weeks to make the suggested revisions. The annotated bibliography and figure list are ungraded (completion counted toward their participation grade), the essay draft counts for 10% of their course grade, and the revision for an additional 15% of their grade.

For an essay to be considered for publication on the *Fashion History Timeline* it needs to research and analyze its subject carefully, use proper terminology, and point to clear visual and contextual evidence that is properly cited. Not every student submission is published immediately, as some are given to subsequent students for revision and some are never published. I, acting as both instructor and *Timeline* editor, make the final call.

Research Question

In my 2018 essay, I presented the published essays on the *Timeline* as a form of public scholarship and as reliable fashion history research. For the present study, I follow up on this assertion and turn a critical eye toward the results of my practice to ask whether my pedagogy and intervention in these student essays truly resulted in good examples of art historical research. Further, this study asks more specifically what features in these essays constitute quality art history according to generally accepted art historical standards as well as my own standards for publishability on the site. Finally, this study considers how the results align with the grades I gave the students and what lessons may be learned about the value of this kind of mentored writing experience.

Methodology

To establish these artwork analysis essays as good fashion history research, I performed content analysis on a sample of 48 essays based on the standards of the discipline. Dr. Kelly Donahue-Wallace and I developed a coding scheme based on the two categories of

information identified by the College Board as constituting a good art history essay.⁶ At FIT, fashion history is taught as part of the art history curriculum by art history faculty and so the standards seemed close to those used in our own courses. The concepts selected were those specific to the history of fashion since the goal of the content analysis was to determine whether the assignment resulted in good fashion history research essays. The concepts are expressed in the essays as sentences or phrases within sentences.

All submitted essays were tallied for their substantive statements (supported by evidence) about the following six categories of evidence:

Visual Evidence:

- Materials
- Shape/Cut
- Technique of Manufacture

Contextual Evidence:

- Usage/function of the garment pictured
- Sources/inspiration for the garment pictured
- Historical issue to explain why the garment appears as it does

For visual evidence, the sentence/statement was counted as evidence only if it used specific, descriptive language that was clearly visible or evident in the image. For example, stating that something has a square neckline and a square neckline is visible in the painting would be counted.

For contextual evidence, counting the statement as evidence would require direct correspondence between the object and the contextual information. For example, saying “Henry VIII was king of England” would not be counted, but saying “King Henry VIII of England popularized this type of armor” would.

In addition to those six categories of evidence, I also tracked data on the essays that I thought significant to demonstrate general writing skills, including:

- Number of words
- Number of quotations
- Number of paraphrases
- Number of sources cited

Only the “About the Fashion” section of the essays was coded, as that was where the central invention of the students was taking place. Word counts and all other data presented here only include the “About the Fashion” section. For example, a student may have cited many more than three sources, but I only counted those cited in the “About the Fashion” section.

⁶ CollegeBoard, “AP Art History Course and Exam Description, Effective Fall 2019,” n.d., <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/pdf/ap-art-history-course-and-exam-description.pdf>.

After coding each essay, I assigned it into one of four qualitative categories concerning its publishability as reliable fashion history research:

- Yes, after limited editing (less than an hour)
- Yes, after moderate editing (less than 2 hours)
- No, but will assign to another student to revise
- No, requires too much work

After making that judgment, I also then noted what kind of editing was required and the severity of the problem:

- Grammar/writing issues (Minor/Moderate/Major)
- Research issues (Minor/Moderate/Major)
- Formatting issues (Minor/Moderate/Major)
- Citation issues (Minor/Moderate/Major)

I also made brief comments about the essay's specific problems. Grammar/writing issues encompassed any deviations from standard written English. Research issues could include any unsupported historical claims, an inadequate number of research sources or comparison images, or sources being of inadequate quality. Formatting issues were technical issues with the WordPress platform or inadequate image captions. Citation issues included incorrect use of parenthetical citations, deviations from Chicago-style in the bibliography or, at the severe end of the spectrum, an absence of citations.

Several limitations affecting this study are important to disclose. The final versions of the essays submitted in the course were the ones that were coded for analysis. It was not possible to also code the draft versions of the essays as they are overwritten on the platform upon revision and this study was conceived after the conclusion of the semester. It should be noted that the coded final essays went through multiple, instructor-mediated rounds of editing, as I gave them formative feedback on both their annotated bibliographies and essay drafts. Most, but not all students made the changes I suggested on their draft in the revision (7 of the 46 made no changes). Some students chose to correct major issues but left minor ones unchanged. Thus, this article seeks to evaluate the success of student essays produced after multiple rounds of instructor intervention. As the instructor in the course, I also performed the coding, which allows for the possibility of researcher bias, though I masked the student names and essay grades from view while coding them to minimize this as much as possible.

After coding the essays, I added relevant participant information into the database including:

- Draft grade
- Essay revision grade
- Course grade
- Student major
- Student minor
- Student graduation date
- Class meeting day

Participants

The essays reviewed were written by 46 of the 48 students enrolled in the FIT fashion history survey course, HA 344: The History of Western Costume, that I taught in a recent semester.⁷ The class was taught in two sections with 24 students in each section. Students were from 13 different majors (only two of the students were art history majors); the most common major was Technical Design (17 students), not surprising as this is a required course for the major. Fourteen students were majors in Fashion Design. Other majors included: Accessories Design (4 students); Advertising Design (1); Fashion Business Management (5); Fine Arts (1); Jewelry Design (1); and 1 non-matriculated student.

Eighteen of the 46 students self-reported as having a minor. Students were pursuing nine different minors, the most common of which was Fashion History, Theory & Culture with nine students; Art History had five students; Economics, English, French, Creative Technology, Italian, Latin American Studies, and Spanish all had one.

FIT students receive an AAS degree after 2 years and, if they continue on, a BS or BFA after 4 years. Some pursue schooling part-time, so determining conventional class-year standings is complex, but converting their class standing as best as possible, roughly one third were seniors, one third were juniors and one third were sophomores. The class has a prerequisite (HA 112: Renaissance to Modern Art) and was offered in the Fall so only one student was in their first year of college.

Results

Based on the qualitative analysis of the 46 final artwork analysis essays:

- 18 essays were of publishable quality after limited editing (less than an hour);
- 10 essays were of publishable quality after moderate editing (less than 2 hours);
- 8 essays had solid fundamentals, but failed to discuss their comparison images in a substantive way and so would require further intervention by another student to make them publishable;
- 10 essays were not candidates for publication due to their significant weakness in one or more areas.

The content analysis average/median number of statements in the six evidence categories by the essays in the four different quality classifications are recorded below:

⁷ Two enrolled students did not submit artwork analysis essays and did not pass the course and so were excluded from the study and the data below.

Visual Evidence	Materials				Shape/Cut				Technique of Manufacture			
	mean	std	median	IQR	mean	std	median	IQR	mean	std	median	IQR
Yes, after limited editing	5.61	1.65	5.5	1.75	5.06	2.31	5	1.75	1.56	1.15	1	1
Yes, after moderate editing	4.6	1.65	5	2.5	4.5	1.43	4.5	1	0.9	0.74	1	0.75
No, but will assign to another student to revise	3.5	2.33	3	3.5	5.38	3.02	5.5	3.75	0.12	0.35	0	0
No, requires too much work	3.2	1.55	3.5	1.75	4.5	1.18	5	0.75	0.67	0.71	1	1

Contextual Evidence	Use/Function				Sources/Inspiration				Historical Issue			
	mean	std	median	IQR	mean	std	median	IQR	mean	std	median	IQR
Yes, after limited editing	2.41	1.28	2	1	5.67	2.45	5	2.75	6.67	2.35	6.5	2.5
Yes, after moderate editing	2.2	1.62	2	2.5	3.3	1.7	3	2.5	7.4	3.6	6.5	2.8
No, but will assign to another student to revise	0.88	0.99	1	1	3.25	1.91	3.5	2.5	3.25	1.83	3	2
No, requires too much work	1.3	0.95	1	0	3.1	1.52	3	1.75	3	2	2.5	2

Fig. 1 – Frequency of statements in each evidence category by quality⁸

⁸ Thanks to Alex Glenday for helping to analyze the study data and create these charts.

The most marked difference between essays of various qualities was in their tendency to discuss historical issues influencing dress. The strongest essays (“limited editing”) made an average of 6.67 statements about historical issues, whereas the unpublishable essays averaged only 3 such statements.

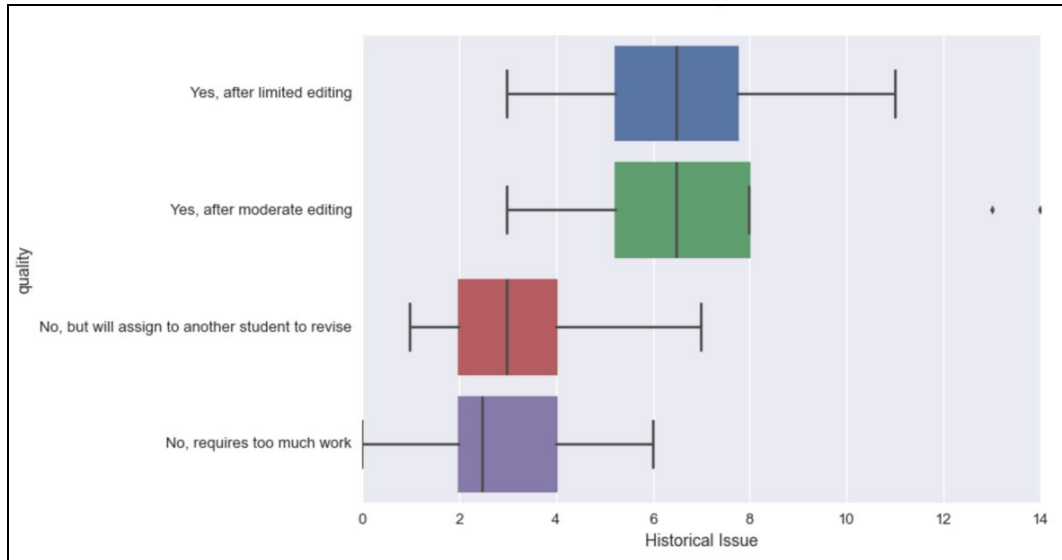


Fig. 2 – Box plot of statements regarding historical issues by quality

This increased tendency to discuss historical issues in relationship to fashion was also correlated with citing more sources overall, with “limited editing” essays citing an average of 3.7 sources, “moderate editing” essays 3.4 sources, “assign to another student” essays 2.25 sources, and “too much work” essays citing an average of only 1.8 sources.

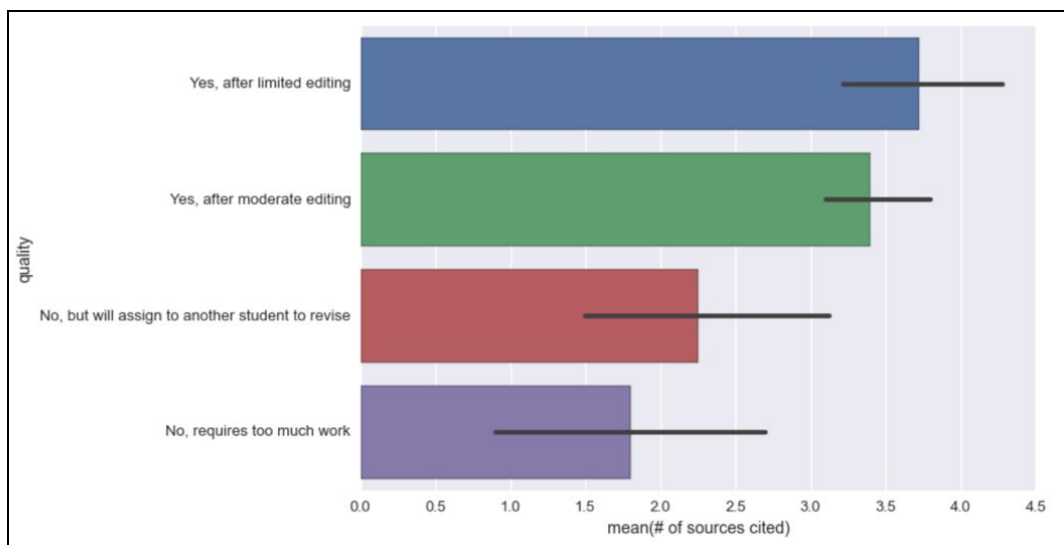


Fig. 3 – Bar chart of mean number of sources cited by quality

Figure 4 notes the frequency of editing issues across the four qualitative essay categories. Note that the numbers are percentages and the first column is “None,” meaning that percentage of essays had no problems in that area. For example, in the “limited editing” category, only 22% of essays had minor citation issues; 78% of the essays had no citation issues.

		NONE	MINOR	MODERATE	MAJOR
quality	error_type				
Yes, after limited editing	Citation issues	78	22	0	0
	Formatting issues	33	61	6	0
	Grammar/writing issues	33	61	6	0
	Research issues	94	6	0	0
Yes, after moderate editing	Citation issues	40	50	10	0
	Formatting issues	10	60	30	0
	Grammar/writing issues	0	70	30	0
	Research issues	70	30	0	0
No, but will assign to another student to revise	Citation issues	25	38	38	0
	Formatting issues	12	62	12	12
	Grammar/writing issues	12	50	38	0
	Research issues	12	0	88	0
No, requires too much work	Citation issues	10	20	20	50
	Formatting issues	0	50	20	30
	Grammar/writing issues	0	20	20	60
	Research issues	0	0	10	90

Fig. 4 – Severity of editing issues by quality (%)

In terms of frequency of editing issues, Figure 5 captures how often I identified the following issues and their severities overall:

value	MINOR	MODERATE	MAJOR	total
variable				
Citation issues	14	6	5	25
Formatting issues	27	7	4	38
Grammar/writing issues	24	9	6	39
Research issues	4	8	9	21

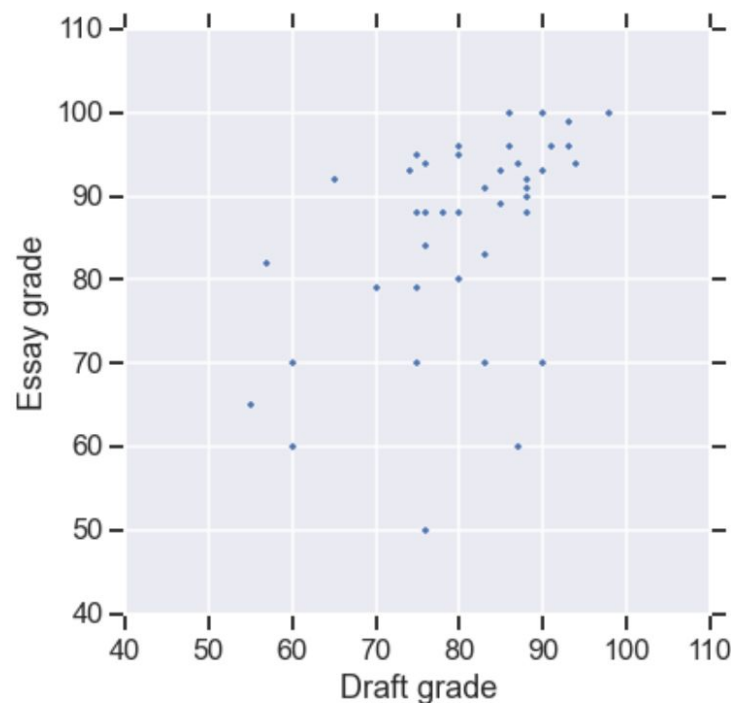
Fig. 5 – Counts of editing issues by severity

Figure 6 shows how performance on the draft related to performance on the revision and in the course. All 18 students whose final essays were deemed in need of “limited editing” received an A on the essay and would go on to receive an A in the course. Notably, however, of those 18 students, only seven had also received a grade of A on the draft.

Quality	draft_letter_grade	essay_letter_grade	course_letter_grade	Count
Yes, after limited editing	A	A	A	7
	B	A	A	8
	C	A	A	2
	D	A	A	1
Yes, after moderate editing	A	C	A	1
	B	A	A	2
		B	A	2
		C	C	1
	C	D	A	1
		A	A	1
		B	A	2
		C	C	1
No, but will assign to another student to revise	B	A	B	1
		B	A	1
			B	1
		C	C	1
	C	B	A	1
			B	2
		C	B	1
		D	D	1
No, requires too much work	B	B	C	1
		C	C	1
	C	C	B	1
			C	1
		F	C	1
	D	A	A	1
		C	C	1
		D	B	1
	F	B	B	1
		D	C	1

Fig. 6 – Progression of grades from draft to revision to course

The relationship and distribution of draft versus final essay grades can be seen in the scatter plot below:



shape and cut because so many were fashion or technical design majors, which center on shape and cut.

There were only minimal differences across quality levels in the number of statements students made about technique of manufacture or the use/function of the garments depicted; students at all levels rarely discussed either topic. That the students did not discuss construction or use prompted me to realize it is not a topic I address frequently in lecture myself—an omission I will attempt to rectify in the future and to attend to when commenting on future drafts. The rest of the data is as one might expect, the stronger essays make more statements about historical issues, materials, and sources or inspirations for the garments than the weaker ones.

Given the importance of including historical contextual information and its direct correlation to essay quality noted above (Fig. 2), I realized I should require at least 3 book sources regarding *fashion*, rather than just 3 book sources total. The weaker essays tended to include more sources on the artist to reach the minimum number of sources. This led to errors and deficiencies in their analyses of the fashion (Fig. 3).

As Figure 4 shows, the strongest essays had fewer and less severe editing issues overall. The weakest essays had the most “major” editing issues and typically struggled in multiple areas.

The most frequent editing issues across all quality levels were with regard to online formatting and grammar/writing (Fig. 5), which was encouraging as neither is the primary focus of my instruction, though I do provide training and feedback on both. Research and citation issues were relatively infrequent, suggesting that class time spent on both topics has been successful. Before I began teaching students to use Zotero (and now [zoterobib](#)), citation issues were very common. The most frequent grammar/writing issues were divergences from standard written English. Many of my students are culturally and linguistically diverse. While I insist students use correct fashion history terminology and avoid slang or informal writing, I do not penalize them in the assignment for not yet mastering all details of standard written English. That said, the *Fashion History Timeline* does adhere to standard written English, which explains that otherwise strong essays with minor or moderate grammar/writing issues were more likely to end up in the “moderate editing” category (Fig. 4).

The most common way that student essays fell short across the quality levels was a failure to adequately discuss comparison images. Indeed, it was the principal factor in why essays were put in the “assign to another student to revise” category. Students seem to assume the reasons they choose their comparison images are obvious – a failure to be explicit about visual evidence that I had seen students previously struggle with in my years of teaching writing at Harvard. This suggests I should require discussion of comparison images from the first stage of the research process. Indeed, when I did so in a subsequent related class on 20th-century fashion history I already saw improvements.

My analysis revealed that two-thirds of the work produced by the students in the course could be considered reliable fashion history research and a candidate for publication on the *Timeline*: 40% of the student essays (those in the “limited editing” category) were easy candidates for

publication at the conclusion of the course and another 22% were publishable without further student intervention (those in the “moderate” editing category). These essays demonstrated strong visual and contextual evidence and employed good written communication. This publishable work notably was largely produced by non-majors in their first fashion history course. Student class year, graduation date, and which day of the week they took the class did not matter. The students’ major and minor (or lack thereof) did not correlate to their essay quality. Whether students quoted or paraphrased their sources was not a significant determiner of quality, nor was length.

The qualitative evaluations I made mapped fairly directly onto the students’ scores on the essay and in the course (Fig. 6). Students whose essays were deemed publishable after limited editing received an average grade of A for both the assignment and the course. Students whose essays required moderate editing received an average grade of B on the assignment and an A- in the course. Those whose essays needed to be assigned to another student in a future class for revision received a B on the assignment and a B in the course. Those whose essays required too much work for publication received an average of a C on the assignment and a B- in the course.

Assuming the grade is a rough proxy for essay quality, the data demonstrates conclusively what instructors know to be true: students made significant improvements in quality between draft and revision. In the “limited editing category,” eight students went from a B on the draft to an A on the revision and two from a C to an A. Overall, 33 of the students improved their scores, by an average of 10.12 points; the median was 9 points (Fig. 7). This suggests that my interventions at the draft stage prompted student revisions that measurably improved their work. Indeed, providing content-level feedback has been shown to be effective in improving both the organization of student writing and the quality of its content, and to be correlated with greater time spent revising by students.⁹ Fortunately for instructors embracing this approach, most students view feedback positively and appreciate the opportunity for revision.¹⁰

I attribute the fact that six students did worse on the revision than on the draft to my practice of grading citation issues much more harshly on the final submitted essay than on the draft. That seven students did not revise likely stems from their satisfaction with their draft grade and their limited time, though demotivation from the feedback is also a possibility. My results in this area are in keeping with research. A meta-analysis of feedback interventions in general (the study was not specific to writing) found that while on average they improve performance, they actually reduce performance in more than one third of the cases.¹¹ Thus, the common assumption that feedback will lead all student writing to improve should be discarded. Yet, so should the

⁹ Jody S. Underwood and Alyson P. Tregidgo, “Improving Student Writing Through Effective Feedback: Best Practices and Recommendations,” *Journal of Teaching Writing* 22, no. 2 (January 2, 2006): 79.

¹⁰ Benjamin Garner and Nathan Shank, “Student Perceptions of a Revise and Resubmit Policy for Writing Assignments,” *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (September 2018): 363, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490618784962>.

¹¹ The reasons for this are complex, see Avraham N. Kluger and Angelo S. DeNisi, “The Effects of Feedback Interventions on Performance: A Historical Review, a Meta-Analysis, and a Preliminary Feedback Intervention Theory,” *Psychological Bulletin* 119, no. 2 (February 1996): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.119.2.254>.

assumptions that most student writing is of irredeemably poor quality or that only a select few exceptional undergraduate majors in art history can produce reliable or worthwhile contributions to the field.

Conclusion

In accordance with other studies, this case study found that student writing quality can be improved via instructor feedback in a multi-stage writing and revising process. Undergraduate student research and writing can produce essays that qualify as reliable sources for fashion history. Content analysis permits a more objective measure of student strengths and weaknesses which is helpful for improving teaching and student outcomes.

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